

## Being the Light of the World

“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.” This morning’s Gospel passage comes from the most famous sermon of all time, Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. To put it in context, let’s set the scene. Jesus has been incredibly busy, traveling all over Galilee to preach and teach in the synagogues, heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God. He’s become so famous that people are constantly seeking him out, traveling for as many as eighty miles just to catch a glimpse of him. Huge crowds follow him from town to town. When he sees how many people have come to hear him, Jesus climbs a hill near the Sea of Galilee, getting far enough above the crowd that everybody can see and hear. Then, he begins to preach.

Last week, Jesus gave us the Beatitudes, nine blessings that God showers on people who either suffer unfairly or are especially virtuous. This morning, he speaks more broadly to the entire assembly. “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus declares to them. “You are the light of the world.” Those are bold assurances to a crowd that has often been portrayed as a pretty ragtag bunch. A few rich and powerful people came to Jesus to test him or to ask him for special favors, but most of the folks who were listening that day probably didn’t have much money or power. They came looking for Jesus because they needed something – healing, food, or hope – and they thought he might be able to provide it. Jesus was their hero, so they came to him for help.

Today, people often look for help in other places. They go to doctors for healing when they’re sick and get jobs to make money so they can buy houses and food. Some people still look to Jesus for hope, but many others find inspiration elsewhere. Some of us idolize celebrity actors or musicians, while others root for famous athletes. A lot of us look to fictional characters in the movies and on television. Whether you’re eight years old or eighty, if you like action and adventure movies, you probably have a favorite hero. You may enjoy Iron Man’s banter, Luke

Skywalker's swordsmanship or, especially if you're younger, you might like Spider Man. Gal Godot's Wonder Woman was a revelation for many girls and women. But today I'd like to talk about my own favorite, the first and, I'd argue, greatest superhero of them all: Superman.

If you've lived in America for more than fifteen minutes, you know who Superman is and have probably heard his origin story. Born on the doomed planet Krypton, Superman came to earth in a spaceship as a baby. He was raised by a humble farmer and his wife, growing up in a small town in Kansas. His alien heritage gives him superhuman powers: strength, speed, heat vision, enhanced senses, and invulnerability to every deadly thing on earth except kryptonite, a mineral from Krypton that villains use when they're foolish enough to take him on. With all those powers, Superman could easily become a super-bully, doing whatever he wants and destroying anyone who tries to stop him. But instead, he conceals his powers and lives like a regular guy most of the time. He has a job, he has a girlfriend and, even when he's flying around in that bright red cape, he's just as likely to pull a little old lady's stranded cat out of a tree as he is to catch a falling airplane or rescue the earth from alien invaders.

There are a surprising number of academic articles about Superman, many of which discuss him as the comic book equivalent of Jesus. There are quite a few sermons about Superman out there, too. A lot of them are very negative, accusing people of worshipping the Man of Steel when they should be worshipping Jesus. I can understand where those preachers are coming from, but I think they're missing the point.

When Jesus told the crowd that they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he wasn't asking them to do anything super. He was telling them that they were already super enough. Jesus wanted his followers to stand up and let the world see their goodness, presenting themselves just as they were. And he wasn't asking any of them to do it alone. When he said,

“you are the light of the world,” Jesus was talking to the whole crowd, saying something like “together, you folks are the light of the world.” He was assuring his followers that they brought flavor and brightness to a world that would be downright dismal without them. As a people, they could be a beacon of hope to lift the hearts of every other nation. The Roman Empire might have conquered Israel, but the Romans hadn’t broken the spirit of the Hebrew people. Jesus was urging his followers to show their courage, to stand together and shine.

That leads to one of my favorite things about Superman. He could spend his days alone in his Fortress of Solitude, mourning the loss of Krypton and ignoring all the trouble and danger into which humanity so often stumbles. But he chooses instead to become one of us, living among us and sharing his talents just as our earthly heroes do. His talents are amazing, but they’re no different from the heroism of our first responders, medical teams, teachers, and other essential workers. Superman could rule the world – he chooses instead to serve it.

You may be thinking “okay, this is fun, but why is the preacher talking about Superman on a Sunday morning in church? Shouldn’t she be talking about Jesus?” Let’s tie them together with something they have in common: lots and lots of nicknames. We know Jesus as the Son of God, the Word of God, the Lamb of God, the Risen One, the Nazarene, the Galilean, and the Prince of Peace. Superman, whose birth name is Kal-El and adoptive name is Clark Kent, has also been called the Man of Tomorrow, the Man of Steel, the Last Son of Krypton, Big Blue, Smallville, Supes, and the Boy Scout. And that, Scouts, ties him back to you.

Superman isn’t a hero just because he’s big and strong. The evil Kryptonian General Zod was just as physically strong as Superman and Zod’s henchman, Non, was even bigger. Superman is a hero, the ultimate good guy, because he really is such a *good* guy. He isn’t perfect. Superman can be a little pompous. He tends to be a bit too sure that he’s right about things, and

he gets a smidge rougher than he should with his adversaries sometimes. But he'd be the first one to tell you that he's not Jesus and nobody should ever worship him. Worship is for God, not for people, and Superman is always honest about important things like that. He's also trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. If that sounds familiar to you, it should. They call Superman the Boy Scout because he has all the good qualities that Scouting can give to you.

Here's the thing: *goodness has power*. Goodness is a superpower, and it's one you can learn even if you can't fly through the air, outrun a freight train, or leap tall buildings in a single bound. The Scout Law tells you what goes into being one of the good guys, and Scouting can help you become good guys if you let it. Don't ever let anybody tell you that being a Scout isn't cool, because goodness is the coolest superpower there is. If it's good enough for Superman, it's good enough for anybody.

Jesus recognized the goodness in his followers. He encouraged them to let their goodness shine as a beacon of hope for everyone around them. I think he wants the same thing from us. Jesus never asks us to do impossible things. But he does ask us to do hard things sometimes, and being good isn't always easy. You have to practice, and sometimes you just won't be able to be as good as you want. Even Superman makes mistakes once in a while. But following the Scout Law will help you and, although Superman is a character in the movies and not a real person, you can think about him when a problem comes up and you're not sure what a Scout should do. Better yet, you can talk to your pack leaders, your parents, your teachers, and all the grownups in your life who want to help you grow into the best people you can be, and you can ask your fellow Scouts for help when you need it. You, Scouts, are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world, and goodness is a Scout's best superpower. Go get 'em, Scouts. *Amen*.